

## **Report to the Legislature**

### **Community's Commitment to Children Whatcom County Family and Community Networks Pilot Project**

Chapter 546 Laws of 2009  
ESHB 1244 Sec. 202(18)

November 1, 2012

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## **Executive Summary**

Chapter 546, Laws of 2009 Sec. 202(18) requires the Children's Administration to contract for a pilot project with family and community networks in Whatcom County and up to four additional counties to provide services. The pilot project was designed to provide a continuum of services and supports to reduce out-of-home placements and the length of time that a child stays in a placement outside of their home. The focus of the "services" is re-engaging families with their community and building a network of informal, neighborhood supports. Additional pilot sites were established in Walla Walla, Island County, and Northshore/Shoreline network areas.

The children and families served by these pilots are families residing in the DSHS Children's Administration's geographic Region 2 North Hub. The proviso also authorized pilots in up to four additional counties. The families include those currently engaged in Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS), youth in out-of-home care, and youth at imminent risk of being removed from their home and placed in out-of-home care.

The Children's Administration and the community-based Whatcom Family and Community Network worked together over the last several years to create a strong partnership. This partnership produced exciting and promising community-based strategies to engage the full community with families that have historically remained socially isolated and at risk of re-abusing or neglecting their children.

This strong partnership and its collaborative work produced many of the concepts used in these pilots as to how a local community and the state can effectively partner in providing key community supports to children and families involved with the child welfare system. These new concepts include how the state can contract and work differently with the local community to help reduce barriers these families face when attempting to reunify their family or to prevent removal of a child from their home.

The strategies to achieve these results include linking formal and informal support to families that create a network of social supports. These supports can help move families out of the dependency system and support them in sustaining a healthy, supportive home where the child and the entire family can thrive.

As a component of measuring the success of this pilot, parents, relatives, and kin providers will be evaluated by measuring a demonstrated increase to their skills to provide a safe, supportive, and nurturing home for their child.

## **Community's Commitment to Children**

Chapter 546, Laws of 2009 Sec. 202(18):

*“Within the amounts appropriated in this section, the department shall contract for a pilot project with family and community networks in Whatcom County and up to four additional counties to provide services. The pilot project shall be designed to provide a continuum of services that reduce out-of-home placements and the lengths of stay for children in out-of-home placement. The department and the community networks shall collaboratively select the additional counties for the pilot project and shall collaboratively design the contract. Within the framework of the pilot project, the contract shall seek to maximize federal funds. The pilot project in each county shall include the creation of advisory and management teams which include members from neighborhood-based family advisory committees, residents, parents, youth, providers, and local and regional department staff. The Whatcom county team shall facilitate the development of outcome-based protocols and policies for the pilot project and develop a structure to oversee, monitor, and evaluate the results of the pilot projects. The department shall report the costs and savings of the pilot project to the appropriate committees of the legislature by November 1 of each year.”*

This report provides an overview of the work completed over the time period of July 2009 – June 2012 and specific activity of the Whatcom site between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012.

## **Background of Collaboration**

The Whatcom Family & Community Network (WFCN) and the Region 2 North Hub Bellingham DCFS office have been working together on Family to Family, an Annie E. Casey Foundation initiative, since 2007. This strong collaborative partnership produced many of the concepts used in these pilots as to how a local community and the state can effectively partner in providing key informal services to children and families involved with the child welfare dependency system. These new concepts include how the state could contract and work differently with the local community to help reduce barriers these families face when attempting to reunify their family or to prevent removal of a child from their home.

The intent of the pilot projects is to develop and implement new approaches to service delivery in up to four additional counties in Washington state. The overall goal is for the community and residents to step up as the primary sustaining support for these families so the state can safely return the child to their home. Four Family Policy Council Community Networks were ready to engage residents to achieve this goal, in partnership with the Children's Administration's Family to Family Initiative, and constitute the core for implementing this pilot design. The Whatcom Pilot Advisory Team has provided oversight and coaching to the pilot sites in Island County, King County-North Shore/Shoreline, and Walla Walla County.

The new approaches used in the pilot sites are based on strategies of neighborhood-based community engagement and the expansion of social networks as "core-services." The Whatcom County Children's Administration's Family to Family Team developed these strategies together. These strategies focus on building a community of natural supports around families where social isolation is a primary cause of abuse/neglect that requires, or is projected to require, a long-term dependency in the child welfare and foster care system.

## **Description of Services**

Children and families served in the pilots include those:

- Currently engaged in Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS), or
- Youth in other CA out-of-home placements, or
- Youth who are at imminent risk of out-of-home placement.

## **Services/Supports Families Receive**

Services and supports that families receive include:

- Services from a Community Navigator who is a community-based support person who meets with the family and their DCFS and community team. A social support plan that includes resources for emergent needs, community support services, and opportunities to build a larger, healthy social network is developed. The

Navigator acts as a peer coach and community support person to help the parent develop the competencies and safety requirements needed for reunification.

- The Navigator provides coaching, advocacy, and reinforcement on child health, safety, and parenting that the family receives from other providers. This coaching is done with the parent and the other individuals and systems the family has for support.
- The Navigator and the Community Network engage the family in neighborhood activities and independently work with local residents to create healthy activities for families to share their skills and interests and participate with other residents.
- Volunteers in the community are recruited and families are linked to these volunteers for specific tasks, such as home repair and household items, and ongoing support such as transportation and child care.
- The Navigators are supervised by Network staff.
- The pilot project uses outcome-focused training and coaching for Navigators in order to build skills, knowledge, and behaviors that produce desired project results.
- There are ongoing discussions with the Planning Team about evidence-based and community services that might be used to help achieve the outcomes of this project.
- Navigators have regular communication with DCFS social workers to assure communication, alignment of objectives, and a collaborative approach to family support.

### **Outcome Measures**

Outcomes this project strives to achieve include:

- Stability of placements for clients whose families are together at the time of the referral, using measures developed by the Network and the department.
- Successful family reunification for clients with children in an out-of-home placement at the time of the referral.
- Reduced time to achieve permanency.

Parents, relatives, or kinship caregivers will gain demonstrated skill enhancement in several areas including:

- Knowledge and understanding of the mood, behavior, emotional, and educational disorders relevant to the children in their care.
- Skill to support their children and their biological families to cope with the children's moods, behavior, emotional and educational disorders.
- Knowledge and skill in navigating multiple systems involved with the care of their children, including government programs, schools, social service agencies, and other community programs.

- The ability to connect with and use community supports such as neighborhood groups, other parents/families, support groups, community gatherings and recreational activities, and appropriate faith-based activities.
- The ability to access and use appropriate professional services.
- The ability to access and use respite care services.
- The ability to follow through on treatment plans for children in their care.
- The ability to improve communications and quality of family interactions and relationships.
- To display a sense of confidence and hopefulness regarding the care of their children along with a decreased sense of isolation, hopelessness, blame, and failure.

### **Contract**

The Whatcom team established a job description and key responsibilities for the peer Navigator position, developed service-reporting forms with core service objectives, and drafted evaluation protocols. The Whatcom Team and Region 2 North Hub DCFS staff developed a model contract for peer Community Navigators as the foundation of the new pilot projects' contract.

The Whatcom contract for the Navigator and community-building part of the contract was originally budgeted for approximately \$90,000 each year, depending upon state funding, to serve 24 families. The budget amounts for other pilot sites was set at \$25,000 by the Children's Administration based on availability of Stuart Foundation funding through August 2010 and local DCFS service funding. Additional Stuart Foundation funding was used for planning and travel in the initial pilot site development through August 2010. Budget reductions have resulted in the elimination of these contracts in all but Whatcom County.

### **Whatcom County Summary of Results**

#### **Overview of Whatcom Families Served**

Initial family referrals for Navigator support began in September of 2008. Referrals were primarily families involved with Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS). The referrals came from social workers, including Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) Facilitators, and BRS staff. A few of the first families had initiated their relationship with DCFS through voluntary services. In April 2009, when the first contract was signed, the Whatcom Family and Community Network began tracking the hours and type of supports, activities, and engagement with families.

#### **July 1, 2011 – June 30, 2012**

Over the past year, the Community Navigator project operated by the Whatcom Family and Community Network received referrals for 19 new families from Children's Administration. These were typically complex cases, ranging from serving families with

youth living out of home, some of which were receiving BRS, to children/youth living at home and at risk of out-of-home placement. In addition, the project continued to serve twelve families who were referred in the prior year and continued to receive services during 2011-2012. Eighteen of these families lived in Bellingham, three families were homeless, and the remainder was spread throughout the county, including Maple Falls, Ferndale and Blaine.

### **Family Characteristics**

Characteristics of the families/caregivers include:

- Fifteen households were single parent “head of household” and sixteen were “couple” households.
- Caregivers ranged in age from nineteen to fifty one years of age.
- There were a total of fifty-six children represented in these families ranging in age from five months to seventeen years old.
- Twenty six families/caregivers had previous involvement with the Children’s Administration.
- The majority of families/caregivers with children placed out-of-home had their children removed due to neglect concerns.
- While these families/caregivers were predominantly Caucasian, other races/ethnicities represented included Hispanic, Asian, Lebanese, African American and Native American.
- Almost all of these families/caregivers were receiving public assistance at the time of referral.
- A primary reason for referral was the high level of social isolation experienced by the caregiver(s) within their family.

### **Process and Outcomes Results of Whatcom Navigation Services Contract 2011-2012**

Of the thirty one families/caregivers referred for service including those served over two fiscal years, twenty eight had some level of engagement with a Community Navigator. Three parents/caregivers declined services after efforts to engage them. Two families were referred late in the year and did not receive enough service to be measured for outcomes. The following are outcomes for the remaining twenty-six parents/caregivers receiving Navigator services during the past year;

- Two of these families had youth with complex needs placed in Behavior Rehabilitation Services (BRS) at the time of referral. In one family, the youth has successfully returned home from BRS services and is stable. The other youth is residing with his parents and they are receiving In-Home BRS services.
- Seven caregivers had children in their home during the time of referral to the Navigator program. Only one family experienced their child removed to an out-of-home placement during this intervention.
- Thirteen caregivers had had their children placed in out-of-home care at the time of referral to the Navigator program. Five caregivers had their children returned



home, three had their parental rights terminated, and five remained in out-of-home care as of June 30, 2012.

- Four families had a total of ten children in “Trial Return Home” status at the time of referral. Trial Return Home follows an episode of out-of-home care under court ordered dependency status. It allows children to return home with CA oversight, structure, safety assessment and supports to achieve a safe and successful transition home and permanent reunification. This structure includes monthly Health and Safety visits by the assigned Social Worker. Of these four families, all ten of the children continue to remain in the family home.

#### **Process Information (July 1, 2010-June 30, 2011)**

Families referred 7/11-6/12	19
Families served	31
Total hours of service	1672
Average length of engagement	6 months
Average number of hours per family	54
12-Month costs for client services	\$52,769
Average cost per family	\$1,702

#### **Feedback from the Community Navigators**

- Both natural and professional supports involved in the lives of the family increased from the time of the referral, including engagement with family/relatives, increased use of treatment and parent education resources, connections with education resources, connections to Veterans Administration, assistance with food, housing, and transportation.
- The Community Navigator reports caregivers have better relations with service providers than at the time of referral.
- Caregivers increased their understanding of the steps necessary to parent their children without involvement with Children's Administration.
- The Community Navigator saw overall improvement in child safety for almost all families served over the past year.

#### **Feedback from Social Workers who referred families**

- Some overall increase of parental skill and ability to care for their children.
- Navigators were helpful in the area of improved child safety.
- There was overall improvement in the families’ connections with a variety of informal and formal supports and in families supported by a collaborative team.
- In some cases, parents/caregivers were not responsive to attempts by the Navigator to engage them in this service.

### **Comments from Social Workers**

“The Navigator’s work with this mother has been impressive. She feels very supported, has had a lot of help from the Navigator building relationships. She is able to trust someone and develop a friendship. The kids are doing much better. They are stable, compliant, going to camp, are in counseling. They are getting the attention they need and have become a cohesive family. The mother reports that the Navigator has been an asset to her stability.”

“The father’s competencies seemed to improve. Overall, he has been able to demonstrate child safety skills. I felt comfortable with the Navigator on this team and the ease with which we worked together. Towards the last review period the father and mother seemed to pull together and work as a team. This case was at a critical point. I believe having the Navigator in the mix helped dad gain more insight as to his role and the navigator connected him to other community programs that will offer ongoing support. Making connections to parents in an informal way is less threatening to our clients.”

“The community Navigator established a relationship with the mother and she felt supported by the Navigator. The Navigator assisted the mother in learning about the family dinner and other supports arranged through her agency. The Navigator put herself in the position of being the ‘go between’ and would often represent the mother at meetings when the mother was not present. The mother engaged in drug and alcohol treatment. She did learn more about the court process, timelines and requirements regarding permanency. The Navigator’s reports regarding the mother’s parenting skills influenced the court’s decision to return the children.”

“Having the Navigator in there on a regular basis and getting the father involved in the men’s group really helped him. Since the Navigator program started there have been no CPS reports from the day care center and the father expanded his efforts to keep the home in better shape. I believe the added intensive work on the part of the Navigator really helped springboard this case towards dismissal. I believe it is a worthwhile program. The parents have a way to engage with needed services without feeling the department is pushing them into it.”

“The Navigator did an outstanding job of trying to engage the parents in change. Unfortunately, the parents could not continue to meet minimum standards of parenting on a consistent basis.”

“One of the child safety issues in the home was cleanliness. The Navigator gave the family constructive comments regarding the cleanliness and how to keep it consistently clean. Due to the family’s ability to keep on top of the house issues, the children were able to return home and stay home.”

“The Navigator was instrumental in the process of keeping the family on track and utilizing the resources of the department and court to facilitate the return of all the

children to the home. This was a positive process that combined working with a family to motivate them to make changes as well as advocate for them regarding the department and the court so that both of these entities recognized the family's progress."

### **Feedback from Parents served by the Community Navigators**

Parents and caretakers receiving this service were asked to complete Evaluation Questionnaires describing their experience with the project and gains made. The following represents the average scores for each of 12 questions for the seven parents/caretakers who responded. They rated each question on a scale from 1-7; with 7 as "strongly agree" and 1 as "strongly disagree."

1. I feel my Community Navigator has been helpful to me.  
Average score = 5.9
2. I have connected to other resources with the help of the Navigator.  
Average score = 5.5
3. I feel/felt supported by the agencies and staff working with me.  
Average score = 5.5
4. I feel my goals are being met through working with DCFS/CPS and other agencies.  
Average score = 4.9
5. I believe that the community I live in can help me support my children.  
Average score = 5.1
6. I have the friends and family support I need to support my family.  
Average score = 5.2
7. I know what resources there are to support my family and am able to find them.  
Average score = 5.6
8. I know how to build friendships that are healthy for me and my family.  
Average score = 6.2
9. We often do things together with other families in the community.  
Average score = 4.4
10. Our family often gets support and help from our friends and neighbors.  
Average score = 4.6
11. Our family regularly helps out our friends and neighbors.  
Average score = 4.5
12. I feel I understand more and have found ways to be a better parent.  
Average score = 6.3

Parents and caregivers provided the following comments on the questioners:

"The Navigator is a wonderful woman to work with. She is a lot of help. She does her best to do what is right. She is caring and understanding."

"The Navigator was one of the hardest working and most understanding of all the people I worked with. She was able to guide me to programs I was not aware existed, which helped us get stabilized. Her help was invaluable. We (my boys and I ) are back together and doing great!"

"I think it was great. She really helped and I felt she related to me."

"I feel they helped me in directions towards things I have accomplished on my own. Thank you."

On July 13, 2012 at a family dinner, six parents (five Moms and one Dad) took 45 minutes as a group to answer some open-ended questions about their experience with a Community Navigator. Two WFCN staff and the DCFS Area Administrator were present and took notes. Parents seemed to feel comfortable giving open feedback about the department. The following is a representative sample of quotes from their responses.

"It's been better with a Navigator. It is someone else to ask questions, a second opinion, someone to talk to who is in the middle between me and CPS."

"I don't like people much but the Navigator pushed me to get to the family dinners and get out and meet others. She did things for me, like volunteering to do my supervised visits so I could get more time with my children."

"She helped me get grounded with resources I need. She went to appointments to be there for me. She translates the information, is comfortable to communicate with. She does her best to fit her suggestions to what I need, like housing and DV services."

"She is non-judgmental. She takes my call anytime. She is there within five minutes if I need her. She took me out for ice cream when I got my first clean UA. I feel she is there for me, my kids love her to death."

"She drives me to appointments so I don't have to spend seven hours using public transportation. Dealing with CPS is really stressful and she helps me keep it together."

Parents were asked "what makes a good Navigator?" These were the responses:

"She doesn't judge me. She lets me be myself. She's encouraging, regardless of my past. She tells her story. She's been through it. Not a lot of workers know about homelessness, having children, drug addiction. She knows resources. But I've taught her some things, too. She sees me as a good mother."

"She comes from the foster parent side; she talks about stuff as a foster parent. It helps if you have a story. She's willing to supervise my visits - I hadn't seen my child in 6 weeks. She gives me information about CPS in a way that I can understand."

"She helps me prioritize what's important - says you can put this and this off until later, but need to do this now."

“She can tell me ‘quit your stuff.’ She treats me like and lets me be a real person. She tells me I have to change myself.”

“She's willing to make some phone calls I don't want to make. They respond to the Navigator quicker than me, sometimes. It helps to have an extra person calling, makes me more of a priority.”

### **Navigator Family Narratives**

One couple referred for Navigator services has two children who were placed in foster care a month before the Navigator referral. The Navigator has been working with this couple for three months. Dad remains very eager to learn and get their children back. Mom is very quiet withdrawn. Dad moved out of their home in January to the Mission because he felt it would be easier to “fix himself” and get the children back rather than try to “fix mom” and his relationship with her. Dad is the one remaining engaged at this time.

The Navigator stopped working with Mom as it proved difficult to be working with both parties. Mom was not engaging with the Navigator and would withdraw quickly. Mom would answer Navigator’s questions, but would not initiate dialogue. Mom does now go to the Food Bank on her own and will take the bus to visits with her children— these are new behaviors for her. A new Navigator is now working with Mom and the original Navigator continues to work with Dad.

With the support of the Navigator, Dad obtained full-time employment in April and is saving money to move into his own housing. Dad is compliant with everything but the housing because the Mission is not a place for children. Dad remains hopeful that as soon as he can find and afford housing that his children will be returned. The Mission wants him to have \$3000 in savings before he leaves and he is striving for this while still paying half of the bills for his wife so she has housing. Dad is choosing to work nights so he is available for visits, appointments, classes, etc. during the day. Dad continues to reliably use his bike as his exclusive mode of transportation.

Dad is involved with many people at the Mission, his co-workers, Dad 2 Dad (a group of dads who have been or are engaged with Children’s Administration), and potluck dinners (coordinated by the Navigator) for families engaged with Children’s Administration. Both the dinners and Dad 2 Dad coordinate presenters to attend based on the parent requests and have included attorneys and parenting professionals. Dad has taken initiative at the Neighborhood Resource Center where these events are held to coordinate with other fathers to keep the lawn mowed. Dad has also purchased a child’s table/chairs as this is where his visits are held and he wants his children to learn to eat properly. Dad states the table/chairs are a donation so other children can use them on visits as well. Dad takes it upon himself to vacuum and straighten up the center if needed.

Dad is involved in Parents Helping Parents, and would like to take Parent Child Interactive Training. Dad maintains weekly visits with his counselor. The Navigator states Dad is interacting much more with his children than he was when first referred. Dad tries diligently to meet Children's Administration expectations.

Dad's next goals are to take The Whatcom Dream financial literacy course, start reaching out to the new healthy natural supports rather than the Navigator, and he has begun to look for housing options as he hopes he can move soon.

Families served by the Navigators are diverse and some are ready to engage in the opportunities presented, while others are not. For example, a Dad was referred at the beginning of April and the Navigator made contact. Dad and Navigator conversed briefly and arranged a time & place to meet. Dad did not show for the meeting and since then is avoiding attempted contact by the Navigator over the phone and in person at his residence. Only so much can be done when the family is not ready.

In another family referred for Navigator services, the mother spent her younger years growing up in a home where there was CPS involvement. Now, at 27 years old, she has amassed 22 CPS referrals between Washington and Alaska. She has five children, one has been adopted, two live with their dads, and she currently has two in her care. When the Navigator first met Mom, she had both children but they were soon removed and placed in foster care. After working with Mom for eight months, she now has her two children back in her care.

The Navigator assisted Mom with housing and Mom currently lives in a clean and sober housing complex and has connected with many of her neighbors. Mom has never had her own place until now; she had been on the streets or "couch surfing" since she had been a teenager. Mom does not associate with her street family at this time. The Navigator and Mom have been working on connecting with healthy natural supports. The Housing Manager has shared with the Navigator that when new people arrive she usually refers them to Mom as she is doing so well, knows a lot of resources, is outgoing, has a positive attitude, and has seen a complete change in her. "It's night and day."

An incident occurred in the complex with a neighbor and her child that really shook this Mom. The Housing Manager and Navigator collaborated to provide the necessary support to Mom. Mom has not been clean since she was 11-years-old until now with the initial support of the Navigator and the Housing Manager. Mom vows to be mentally and physically present for her children. The Navigator has connected her with AA and Mom attends meetings 2-3 times per week. Mom is engaged in intensive outpatient treatment as well and will graduate to "relapse prevention" in two weeks. Mom's mom and stepdad support her sobriety and are more connected now than before as the Navigator has advocated for Mom in this relationship. Stepdad is not allowed around her children and Mom takes this very seriously. Mom cares about being clean and sober and having

her kids at home with her. Mom is more outgoing than when the Navigator first met her, she values what people have to say more and listens more to others.

Additionally, the Navigator supports Mom to continue counseling and the parenting classes she is engaged with. The Navigator co-creates, with families who are engaged in services with Children's Administration, a monthly potluck dinner at a neighborhood resource center. Mom has been an active participant in this dinner for months. Generally, a speaker attends the dinner to share information and answer questions regarding a topic of the parents'/caregivers' choosing.

Currently, Mom is exploring with the Navigator possible next steps regarding either school or securing employment while keeping her children as her priority.

Mom has been extremely pleased with the support and knowledge the Navigator has provided and continues to tell others she knows to ask their Social Worker for a Navigator if they "really want to change."

### **Conclusion**

Children are safer when more people in the community engage with and support socially isolated families. With the primary goal of child safety and reunification, this project continues to test new ways of building community partnerships. This project shows an increase in neighborhood and natural supports for families engaged with the Children's Administration. This proviso provides the opportunity for engaging communities as full partners with the state, both jointly taking responsibility to assure the safety and well-being of our children and their families. Families are more successful in creating social networks and accessing resources for parenting. There is an increased sense that parents and children have assets to bring to their families and community. Parents are able to more quickly reunify with their children in a safe manner or find a safe, permanent solution with community supports. Parents, their children, and the community are building more collaborative relationships with the Children's Administration to help achieve their goals.

Not all of the reunifications were smooth and not all families reunified. However, there is an increased understanding of the barriers and challenges in the family's process with the Children's Administration that families can now better address. Reunified families face challenges due to adolescent development and ongoing family issues, but with an increased support network. With an ongoing relationship with the Community Network, these families are linked to other community-building and neighborhood efforts.